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AUTHOR Kelder, Richard
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ABSTRACT

Assigned to teach a freshman composition course with a history and reading co-requisite, a New York college instructor developed a course in which students would begin to see history--through their reading, writing, and thinking--as a series of events intricately connected with their own lives and ways of looking at the world, rather than something external and unrelated to themselves. Students were given supplementary texts and primary source documents to "personalize" history for them, and they were asked to write essays comparing and contrasting political and social structures, explaining the significance of a historical event, or defining terms in a historical context. After reading John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty," students were asked to write an essay considering how much they conformed to a group, and how much public opinion affected their lives. Moreover, they came to understand biography as a historical document when they were asked to write about an event or person in their own lives that affected the way they viewed the world. They were also asked to examine and compare current controversies, such as the religious war between the Sunni and Shiite Muslim sects, and offer solutions. The course successfully brought students into an unfamiliar discourse community, and helped them see how writing can be used to make meaning and shape larger world views. (Nineteen references are included.) (JC)

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ENTERING A DISCOURSE COMMUNITY:
WRITING AS A MODE OF LEARNING IN A CONTENT COURSE

RICHARD KELDER

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When I was asked to teach a Freshman composition course with a history and reading corequisite it appeared to be nothing short of Sisyphean task: as soon as the gates to the past were opened, they would close, destroyed by the electronic mediums of the dominant culture and its tendency to foster an ahistorical and fragmented consciousness. Unlike believers in Stephen Dedalus' aphorism that history is the nightmare from which we are trying to awaken, I believed that this generation of students immortalizes the present, content to remain oblivious to those events that shaped their collective identities.

Writing in the content area necessitated that I question the maxims of the writing process approach, especially my beliefs surrounding the efficacy of the prewriting experience, free writing, and expressive and narrative discourse, and it forced me to reexamine the metaphors that guided my role as a teacher, that determined how I perceived knowledge to be constructed and validated. These metaphors changed dramatically throughout the course of the semester; I found myself moving from the role of guide and supporter to model, and, finally, to agent provocateur. Eventually, I confronted my students as the "other", held up the mirror of idealization to their consciousness to reflect self-division and alienation, and tried to weave my way in and out of their inner voices, to enter what Bakhtin would call the dialogic dimension of language, in an attempt to mediate meaning between students' private or personal discourse and the language of a discourse community. For Bakhtin meaning is always related to something greater than itself, and to other meanings, which interact and "have the potential of conditioning others." (Dialogic 426). For my purposes, I tried to find the common ontological ground where one

meaning or word would merge with another, to locate the place where Bakhtin postulates discourse exists, that is "on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context." (Dialogic 284).

Ultimately, my objective was to decenter students' subjective experience and knowledge, to "de-privilege" the way in which they constructed reality and meaning, and finally, through a process of re-contextualization have them reevaluate that experience in the light of an objective world of knowledge and values. It might be said that I struggled with their written and unwritten texts, their inner and outer voices, in order to restructure consciousness. By using writing as means to discover meaning and change their way of knowing, I attempted to breakdown the dichotomy between the world of external reality and subjectivity, to make students aware of the intricate relation between perception, language, and knowledge. On an ideal level, I hoped to unite the knower with the known, predicating my theory on the Platonic belief that the latter will change the former, and that knowledge may ultimately change values. To help students direct language and thought into modes of discourse is never easy, and in doing so, I was reminded of Robert Scholes perceptive statement that "the world resists language as the grain of a tree resists the saw, and saws take the form they do partly through resistance." (Textual 112).

Early in the semester, I was confronted with the problem of moving students quickly into the historical context, and a form of discourse in which specific rhetorical strategies would be necessary for development. Because the course was interrelated with history and reading, it also demanded that I reexamine the student's role as reader and, consequently, my theoretical precepts and assumptions

about how students comprehend and respond to written texts. Finally, it forced me to re-examine with my colleagues how reading texts reinforces or determines the rhetorical structures of written discourse, especially within the context of a discourse community. Implementing course objectives necessitated a combination of theory and praxis with the objective of using writing to generate discourse in response to texts, and to broaden students' conceptual knowledge base for understanding historical concepts. In addition, I believed the writing skills would be transferred to reading, with students becoming more active and critical readers, more cognizant about their own expectations as readers and, therefore, more aware of the choices they made in their writing.

It was important to structure writing assignments that would support the modes of discourse demanded by the history context, and integrate the assignments with a critical analysis of the rhetorical structures in historical documents and texts. Finally, I assumed that within the context of the discipline, students would engage with other voices, hear the force of arguments and methods of persuasion, the inherent modes of rhetorical discourse, and invest them with their own intention and meaning in the production of writing. Ultimately, students would become aware of the interrelationships between modes of written discourse and methods of creating meaning.

When asked to write in the historical context, students were often confronted with assignments that required explaining the significance of a historical event. For example, they were asked to analyze a document and draw comparisons between dynasties, or competing ideologies; in short, challenged with writing tasks for which they were unprepared. Also, they were asked to write extended

definitions, which required an ability to include in their responses how a person or event influenced a given state of affairs and to make an evaluative statement which highlighted the significance. Or they were asked to compare and contrast the political and social structures of ancient Japan and China, paying strict attention to specific points of reference. Invariably, what was absent in the student's writing was the ability to explain the significance of an event, and to evaluate it in relationship to other ideas, concepts, and values.

In general, the assignments demanded a rhetorical knowledge of comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and analysis, methods of rhetorical development that many students would not encounter until Freshman Composition 2, the second course in our English department's writing requirement. Caught between the devil and the deep "wine-dark sea," I decided to design writing assignments that would historicize and contextualize knowledge, integrating them with reading assignments that structured the rhetorical framework of meaning-making within the contexts of the history assignments, and with the specific intention of drawing parallels for pattern recognition. To accomplish this, I chose supplementary texts and primary source documents because they personalize history, opening students to a dialogical interaction with a variety of voices and meanings, thereby creating a living dialogue with a moment in history. In addition, primary texts clearly mirror the contradictions or tensions within a historical period, more so than standard history texts. Furthermore, such texts bracket and reflect the hidden signs of an era, those which are in opposition to the more popular and often erroneous generalizations commonly held about a given historical period. Also, their very existence emphasizes the importance of the subjective role in making history,

and serves to demystify the mistaken notion of the objectification or reification of history, and the conception that history transcends and determines its makers. Students can easily identify with the testimony of others making history, especially with those on the margins of society. Finally, the texts serve as rhetorical models, and present the student with paradigms on which they may model their writing and structure meanings.

By analyzing the structure of discourse within documents and secondary readings, I theorized that my students as writers would become more cognizant about the importance of anticipating a reader's responses and expectations for rhetorical forms of comprehension, and of the necessity for establishing a contextual frame of reference, a major problem for many beginning writers. By identifying and analyzing modes of discourse in a close analytical reading, students would internalize the rhetorical structures of the discipline, and enter a discourse community with its inherent methods of argumentation and persuasion, the community's "forms of meaning-making" and share in the ideological and social foundations of its beliefs and assumptions about how knowledge and reality are constructed. Students begin to acquire what the social constructionists would call a sense of the community's language and patterns of thinking and begin to intuit shared meanings, and perceive what Michael Polanyi identifies in a problem as "something that is hidden" and then to sense "an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars." (Tacit 2:).

Determining how students can begin to comprehend a larger historical framework in developing new ways of understanding or seeing is ultimately dependent on the instructor's ability to perceive new ways of teaching. It is imperative, therefore, to reevaluate the

metaphors with which one postulates epistemological foundations of meaning and knowing. An instructor must be aware about how she constructs meaning and then question how this may affect her perceptions and expectations about students' development as writers. In my situation, I found myself moving closer to the emerging voices of student writers, and by contextualizing historical concepts and ideas, I became a collaborative yet challenging voice within the formation of a historical consciousness. I became, if you will, "the implied reader," negotiating the codes representing the larger world of values and knowledge, and the catalyst for evincing responses, raising questions, and mediating the voices and meanings within the context of the discourse.

In identifying the personal discourse, or expressive discourse of the student, an instructor can determine how to use writing as a means of engaging students, determining ways to move them from a personal knowledge base into the world of historical conceptions, so that they may be able to reconstruct disparate subjective meanings and insights into a text that is not only informative but critical of those ideologies and systems of beliefs that have constructed previous historical and social realities. In this way, students become participants in a shared discussion rather than conduits for storing information. In formulating questions that elicit responses which require students to analyze and evaluate the influence of ideas and values on the present epoch, an instructor shifts the focus of the dialectical encounter to the student by asking her to question and critically examine her values and beliefs. This may be the student's first step in engaging the inherent values of a community, and their determinant role in discovering knowledge and meaning. From an

instructional viewpoint, it involves using a pedagogical theory in the service of its own demise.

Saussure has stated that in a syntagmatic relation "a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it, or to both" (123). Devoid of privileged terms "the whole has value only through its parts, and the parts have value by virtue of their place in the whole." (128). Therefore, any written text is tension ridden with many meanings, with words always referring synchronically to others, as well as to others beyond the text itself. In addition, tensions exist between the text and the world, or between subjective consciousness and objective knowledge, and such division underscores the problematic relationship between the word and its so-called objective referent. According to the deconstructionists, the act of creating meaning in written discourse is often directly related to what is in opposition, or contradiction to the textual surface; what is absent is as significant as what is present. Determining what is absent in a student's text is important but not enough; the instructor must often identify the hidden meaning or argument within the text, and dialogue with that voice to elicit this meaning, to practice a form of hermeneutics, what Richard Rorty calls "the activity of spirit-the faculty which makes" rather than finds or mirrors nature (344). Rorty refers to this as the "study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse-the attempt to make sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it, and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it." (320-21). He describes abnormal discourse as "what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these agreed upon set of conventions or

who sets them aside." (321). Such discourse may originate on the margins of meaning and yet have a major impact on thought, and contribute to a revolutionary change in thinking. Revolutionary discourses within the study of history itself, such as Marxism, may serve as examples, and Thomas Kuhn has stated that all historians "consciously or not, are all practitioners of the hermeneutic method." (Mirror 323). When applied to students' writing, the practice of hermeneutics supports a collaborative venture in making and discovering meaning.

In guiding my students into a historical context, I attempted to decenter their frame of reference by creating a dialogue which "defamiliarized" their general understanding of historical concepts and definitions. I mediated the external world of values and knowledge, searching for common nuances of meaning, points of departure which would serve for the articulation of interlocking moments of meaning, the creation of a consensus or shared reality. Attuning my ears to the unsaid, I became a soothsayer of the subtext or unwritten text. In the process of decontextualizing the student's prior knowledge, having them question reasons and causes for events in their writing, I was continually recontextualizing this knowledge in my responses, declaring to students that they were reading historical documents from a historically determined position, and often through the biased eyes of culture, race, and class. Showing students that they are reading and writing in historical time, and consequently that what they have written may be subjected to reinterpretation by another reader at a later date opens the doors of perception. Students recognize that discovering meaning is a on-going dialectical process, constantly evolving through conflict and collaboration, and involves constructing

knowledge with others and communing with other voices, past and present. In my opinion, students are encouraged by the fact that meanings change, and that truths can be rediscovered, or reinterpreted, and that what is thought and believed as truth today may not be so tomorrow.

In written assignments, students projected themselves into the historical contexts of the documents and wrote in response to the text. For example, in using Mill's "On Liberty" I began with a discussion of the political and social contexts of the 19th century, explaining the concept of the tyranny of the majority, and Mill's apprehension and concern for the destructive power of public opinion and authority in the pursuit of truth and individual liberty. Mill's classic treatise is the epitome of 19th century bourgeois liberalism; however, in contextualizing the discussion by showing its relationship to 19th century ideologies, such as Socialism or Utopianism, students had a better idea of understanding its uniqueness, not only in the formation of its libertarian ideas, but also in the rhetorical construction of its meaning. In addition, we examined how it was the intellectual progenitor of many contemporary assumptions about freedom and individualism, and a model for the creation of a public dialogue in the search for truth.

A related writing assignment asked students to consider how much they conformed to the group, to examine how public opinion affected their lives and to explain if they had ever sacrificed a truth for expediency. Another assignment compared the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen and the Declaration of Independence on the points of natural and human rights, and Lockes's concepts of natural rights in the state of nature. A discussion of the documents mentioned

how exclusionary both were in their original creation, in that women were not included in the former, and even though it is not stated openly, only property owners endowed with citizenship in the latter. The discussion included an analysis of how values may confront and change realities, thereby altering social and political perceptions forever. Students were then asked to write about a right that they believed was not currently recognized as legitimate but should be, and to explain why they believed it was so.

To highlight the dialogical relationships in the web of historical meanings, I illustrated how their written responses added another historical dimension to a document or text, contributing to the creation of historical meaning; that their writing was a textual mirror through which they were continually re-defining themselves, shaping and seeing themselves in history, and simultaneously entering a dialogue with generations past and future. I found that Norman Holland's theory of reader-response may be applicable to a historical document, except that the projected identity theme is not necessarily a product of the unresolved conflicts of the oedipal triangle or family romance, but the product of the more socially, culturally, and ideologically determined aspects of the personality, upon which the foundations of a historical awareness may be constructed. Historical texts, like readers, do not exist in a vacuum and showing students how an author created a text that reflects the historical themes or ideas of her time is illuminating to students. Hopefully, in coming to comprehend what's involved in text production, how others create meanings, they will become more conscious of the choices they make in writing, and ultimately assume a more active role in making-meaning as readers, becoming more aware of the rhetorical conventions and

epistemological foundations of a specific discourse community. In doing so, they become as Roland Barthes and other literary theorists would have it, text producers rather than text consumers.

Making students more conscious about how a text is produced provides them with the understanding that in their own writing they are engaging in a dialogue with the diverse voices of a larger community, one whose members have embedded words with historical and cultural meanings. Writing about historical concepts and definitions uncovers the structure of a discipline, its implicit forms of argumentation and persuasion. This leads to the objectification of their own discourse, a growing awareness of the distance separating their writing from the ideal model of the interperative community. By recognizing this difference, students may come to create a persona, a rhetorical self, that dialogues with others within the inherent structures and conventions of the discourse community, not forsaking one world for the other, but alternating modes of discourse, in order to give their own meaning to words and concepts, and to create new ways of seeing and knowing. Ultimately, it may lead to an ability to objectify their discourse, to distance themselves as Anne Berthoff believes from their writing. Finally, students may enter what Richard Rorty calls the arena of edifying discourse, which is a form of abnormal discourse in that "it may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the "poetic activity" of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to

reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions," and in the end "aid us in becoming new beings." (360). By appropriating the words and ideas within the total context of the discourse, students may begin to see language differently, and come to recognize their own intentions and meaning in the word. In doing so they will begin to feel the power of their own voices, written and spoken, the shaping power of language.

According to Walter Ong, writing restructures consciousness, and it imposes a mental order while the writer creates meaning, forcing the structure of thought into a frame work in which it struggles to break free. For Ong, writing fosters alienation and division, a divided consciousness, contrary to the oral word which "first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another, and that ties human beings to one another in society." (Orality 179). The writer must establish both meaning and context, unlike the spoken word "which is part of present actuality and merges with a total situation to convey meaning." (Presence 117) However, Ong points out that writing leads to a "higher unity" and "intensifies the sense of self," key objectives when we speak about the cognitive growth of developing writers, especially when we teach writing in the content area.

Theoretically speaking, students are the texts on which have been inscribed the social and political codes of their time. For example, with as much lip service as this generation pays to individualism and rights, it was revealing to see in essays on individualism how often they identify with the majority view, or sacrificed their individual truth to the group consensus, sometimes by rationalizing their

self-interest in the guise of morality or social and political expediency. It was at points such as this that my role was critical, since what was often needed was a recontextualization of the document within its historical era. For example, in an assignment on Mill's "On Liberty" I showed them how their texts had altered the original meaning of Mill's essay through contradiction or misreading. Therefore, I had to recontextualize Mill's idea of liberty and individualism within their frame of reference, bringing his meaning and voice into a dialogue with theirs, and specifying in my responses to their essays how they had reconstructed his meaning based on a subjective interpretation with beliefs and assumptions originating in contemporary society.

Writing assignments were designed to structure a response that would fit into the framework of the history class and, consequently, move students from a familiar experience into another way of seeing or understanding. Students were interested in writing about their personal history and as expected were quite adept at an oral, narrative, recreation of an experience. But when they were asked to write a personal narrative, a personal history, many began with a typical narrative sequence "I was born on Jan. 23 in Kalamazoo and was one of three children. My mother and father" The narratives moved on sequentially, accumulating experience upon experience, fact upon fact, but with little focus and without a point of view. The narrative needed to create meaning within the discourse of the discipline but failed. What was absent was a critical consciousness determining significance in evaluating and judging the experience. In changing the assignment, I attempted to re-structure the student's experience within a historical framework for creating meaning, to help

them contextualize that experience, based on structuring a historical consciousness that was able to select, analyze and evaluate events; I wanted them to create an observing self, and break down what Rorty calls "the ingrained notion" that "values" are inner and "facts" are outer. (341). In short, the objective was to have students develop a meta-cognitive awareness which would translate meaning into a meta-language, the language of the community.

I changed the assignment by asking students to write a personal narrative which analyzed an experience or event that had a significant impact on their life, and to explain how that had determined and shaped who they were today. The assignment was designed to guide students from the past to the present, and to focus selectively on one experience and evaluate it in the light of their present self-knowledge. This modeled the type of discourse required in the history class because in writing about history one is being selective and interpretive, choosing facts and details which conform to a theory or assumption. To some extent, all writers are guided by an ideology, or rhetorical structure however defined, be it political or social, which is essentially viewing events and reality through the subjective lens of preconceived knowledge and values.

The assignment change produced more interesting essays, which focused on overcoming hardships or described the impact of a powerful personality on their life. In commenting on their papers, I pointed out that they were not only involved in recording their history but interpreting it as well. By entering the genre of personal narrative writing, they evaluated experience in a literary vein, discovering a persona, a voice, which allowed them to see what Rorty would say is the familiar in unfamiliar terms, in a way not unlike some of the

historical and literary texts we were reading, such as *Night* by Elie Wiesel or *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. By objectifying one's history, opening it to the observing and compassionate eye of the Other, one can more easily identify with the plight of the victims of history, and become aware of the power of ideas and ideologies to determine the historical destinies of human beings. Both Wiesel and Achebe's work comment on the inability of human beings to adequately comprehend the enormity of the destructive power in the events taking place around them. And their voices speak to future generations, imploring others to participate in a dialogue, and not to forget the nightmare of history; it is the subjective voice speaking to others, asking for collaboration and recognition of its truth.

In the personal narratives, students were asked to objectify themselves from their experience, to create a double, and engage in a form of historical discourse, which invariably involves being selective about facts and ideas to support a theory or interpretation of historical events. The underlying concept for framing the experience was to provide the student with the opportunity to evaluate the experience and explain its historical significance, in the same way that they would select the significant causes leading to the Reformation or the Renaissance. The narratives enhanced their self-knowledge, because in the process of analysis they filtered a moment or event through memory, and as a result of writing, that event or person would never be viewed the same; it stood over and against consciousness and emerged from the linear oblivion of time, ultimately determining the creation of present and future meanings. Thus, the subjective history of the student flowed into the broader arena of historical discourse, interacted with and shaped past events and

moments, and structured experience in a specific rhetorical framework. Writing assignments also served to reinforce reading skills, to structure a consciousness more acutely attuned to the subtleties of written language and enabled the student to reappropriate the world and self by engaging with historical knowledge.

Other assignments included analyzing contemporary global interdependence in relation to understanding the isolation and uniqueness of ancient dynasties. In class, distinctions were made between the modern state and dynasties and discussed in understanding the importance of internationalism. Another writing assignment was designed to develop the rhetorical mode of cause and effect by evaluating the forces of industrialization in shaping present society and, finally, to contrast the social and economic reasons for the development of the industrial revolution in England. Another assignment reinforced a study of religious conflicts in the ancient world by presenting the student with information regarding religious warfare in the contemporary world, one of which was the history of the Sunni-Shiite Muslim conflict. The contemporary relevance of this conflict was also evaluated. After a lecture in history, students wrote papers examining other religious conflicts and then were to provide solutions to the problems based on their readings. To contextualize the topic, students were also asked to write narratives describing religious conflicts they had witnessed, or any religious, racial, or ethnic discrimination they had experienced. Class discussions also centered on the political conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East and traced the roots of these discords. For many students, the discussions illuminated the significance and importance of history, the impact of ideas and events from the past

determining the present. Other topics were supported by articles from the New York Times and other sources.

By integrating writing and reading assignments in a content course, students become more conscious about using writing as a device of "meaning making" and as a method of discovering knowledge about themselves and the world. They begin to develop an awareness of the distinction between what Rorty calls "knowledge of" and "knowledge that." By entering into the domain of another discourse community, they are able to recognize in another's words their own voice echoing back to them their intention and meaning, somewhat changed but still uniquely their own. By writing in the discipline, students are at the threshold of developing those critical thinking skills which are not only fundamental to the acts of sophisticated reading and writing, but are the foundation for defining an enlightened and educated citizen in a democracy.

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